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ABSTRACT

Because traditional parent-teacher conferences exclude the student from the process, this model does little to facilitate dialogue between parent and child or to recognize the need for students to assume greater control of their academic progress. Student-led conferences are a positive alternative to the traditional middle level parent-teacher conference. Student-led conferences are designed to achieve one or more of the following goals: (1) to encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance; (2) to teach students the process of self-evaluation; (3) to facilitate the development of students' organizational and oral communication skills and to increase their self-confidence; (4) to encourage students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue; and (5) to increase parent attendance at conferences. The student-led process typically has three phases: preparation, the actual conference, and an evaluation component. To prepare students for the conference, teachers instruct students on how to lead the conference, assist them with collecting and preparing information to be shared with parents, and describe how to explain and interpret any information to be shared. During the actual conference, discussion of academic grades is typically the primary focus, but the student-led format also provides an opportunity for students to share the contents of their portfolios and to discuss self-selected academic and social goals for the upcoming term. After the conference, students, parents, and teachers should be given an opportunity to provide their feedback concerning the effectiveness of the student-led format. If some parents want to meet with the teacher alone, teachers can give parents the option of selecting either a student-led conference or a traditional parent-teacher conference, reserving five minutes at the end of the student-led conference for a private conversation between parent and teacher, or permit the parent to schedule a follow-up conference with the teacher. (LPP)

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Student-Led Conferences at the Middle Level

Donald G. Hackmann

The time-honored parent–teacher conference format has traditionally excluded the student from the process. This model does little to facilitate dialogue between parent and child or to recognize the need for students to assume greater control of their academic progress. Fortunately, student-led conferences are emerging as a positive alternative to the traditional middle level parent–teacher conference.

Conference Goals

Middle level faculties have developed student-led conferences to achieve one or more of the following goals:

- to encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance;
- to teach students the process of self-evaluation;
- to facilitate the development of students' organizational and oral communication skills and to increase their self-confidence;
- to encourage students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue; and
- to increase parent attendance at conferences (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989; Hackmann, 1996; Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995; Little & Allan, 1989).

Faculties using this model frequently report that, as a result of involvement in student-led conferences, parent and teacher bonds are strengthened. Both teacher and parent are more likely to initiate subsequent contacts throughout the remainder of the school year (Hackmann, 1996).

Student-Led Conference Model

Although the format and content of student-led conferences may vary from school to school, the concept remains the same: *the student is in charge of the academic conference with the parents.* The teacher simply serves as a discussion facilitator when needed. This increased accountability moves the student from passive—and frequently second-hand—recipient of information shared between teacher and parent, to active participant in a three-way interaction among parent, teacher, and student. Students assume "equal partner" status in discussions concerning their academic progress.

The student-led process typically is conceptualized as three distinct phases: preparation, the actual conference, and an evaluation component (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Little & Allan, 1989).

Preparation. Since the student-led model differs dramatically from the traditional parent–teacher conference, it cannot be assumed that middle level students will possess the self-confidence, organizational skills, and communication skills necessary to lead a successful conference. Therefore, teachers must adequately prepare students and provide them with an appropriate conference structure. In the weeks prior to the conference, teachers instruct students on how to lead the conference, assist them with collecting and preparing information to be shared with parents, and describe how to explain and interpret any information to be shared. Students learn that excuses are not acceptable and understand that they must be able to present artifacts to their parents that depict their progress. Students who become actively involved may be motivated to improve their academic performance.

The student-led conference is designed to be a positive experience for the student. Therefore, students must be allowed sufficient time to prepare their conference folders and scripts. Practice is also important. Teachers should permit students to role-play various conference scenarios with student partners (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989) and should provide feedback to assist students in improving their presentations. Students gain confidence as they practice, and they also learn to anticipate questions that may be asked by their parents.

Prior to conference day, parents should be notified of the new conferencing format, and it should be clearly explained that the student will be in charge and the teacher will serve as a facilitator. Parents should be encouraged to support their child and could also be provided with a list of sample questions they may wish to ask their child during the conference (Hackmann, 1996).

The Conference. Since the student is in charge of the conference and is now adequately prepared to assume this responsibility, some school faculties question whether the teacher should be physically present at the actual conference or simply be available if needed. Schools have taken different approaches to this question. Some decide the teacher will indeed be present for the entire conference but will intervene only when necessary (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hackmann et al., 1995). Other schools schedule three to four conferences in the teacher's room simultaneously, with the teacher moving freely from family to family and spending only a few minutes with each group (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989; Little & Allan, 1989).

Discussion of academic grades is typically the primary focus of the student-led conference, but grades should not be the only focus. With increased numbers of schools now using student portfolios, the student-led format also provides an excellent opportunity for students to share the contents of their portfolios and to explain why each artifact was selected

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for inclusion. Additionally, the conference agenda may include discussion of artifacts that help explain grades (such as test and homework scores, homework assignments and student projects, and records of class attendance, class participation, and the number and types of missing assignments) and discussion of self-selected academic and social goals for the upcoming term. It is important to include both cognitive and affective components in the discussion, but the affective elements should not overshadow the focus on the child's academic progress.

The conferencing format should be envisioned as a process, rather than as an event. Parents and students should be discouraged from becoming fixated on past unsatisfactory performance and should be prompted to engage in mutual problem-solving. The teacher can assist families with the development of a plan of action that recognizes the student's accountability for academic progress while permitting parents to support the child in appropriate ways (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, in press).

Since student-led conferences will in all likelihood include more content than a traditional parent–teacher conference, teachers find that conferences require more time. For example, Countryman and Schroeder's (1996) initial experience with student-led conferencing quickly led to the conclusion that their usual 15-minute timeframe was insufficient. Many schools recommend 20 or 30 minutes to allow for more substantive discussions (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989; Hackmann, 1996).

Evaluation. Either immediately following the conferences or shortly thereafter, students, parents, and teachers should be given an opportunity to provide their feedback concerning the effectiveness of the student-led format. This feedback is essential so that teachers can continue to fine-tune the conference model and can be responsive to the expressed needs of students and parents.

Schools employing this model note that parent attendance at conferences has increased (Hackmann, 1996) and assert that over 90% of parents and students prefer the student-led conference (Hackmann et al., in press). Students report increased self-confidence and personal satisfaction with being directly involved in the conferences. Parents begin to recognize their children's ability to assume increasing levels of responsibility and appreciate the opportunity to strengthen the lines of communication with their children. Citing a more positive and relaxed conferencing atmosphere, teachers report a reduced conference preparation workload and diminished levels of teacher stress during conferences (Hackmann et al., in press).

Traditional Parent–Teacher Conference Options

Although the majority of parents and students may recognize the benefits of student-led conferences, some parents may prefer a traditional parent–teacher conference, and others may simply desire a few minutes with the teacher to address some unresolved questions. Middle school faculties can address these parental concerns in the following ways:

- Allow parents the option of selecting either a student-led conference or a traditional parent–teacher conference;
- Reserve five minutes at the end of the student-led conference for a private conversation between parent and teacher; or
- Permit the parent to schedule a follow-up conference with the teacher, either during scheduled conference times or at a later date.

The Absent Parent

Occasionally, in spite of the best efforts of both student and teacher, a parent is unable to attend the scheduled conference. With the traditional parent–teacher conference, the teacher may never have an opportunity to meet with the parent. However, the student-led conferencing model does not require that the meeting between student and parent occur only at school. The student whose parent cannot attend or chooses not to attend the scheduled conference can still successfully conduct the conference at home.

For More Information

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